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**Original Article**

# NCAA Division III Intercollegiate Athletics Corporate Sponsorships: a systems theory approach

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**Abstract**
Within Division I intercollegiate athletics, many schools outsource their multi-media and sponsorship efforts to bolster their revenue (Johnson, 2005; Maestas, 2020). At the Division I level, outsourcing presents challenges as utilization of a third-party firm can lead to loss of control by athletic administration. The problem statement for this study is whether similar management issues are prevalent within corporate sponsorships at the Division III level of intercollegiate athletics, examining if systems theory could enhance efficiency. This research approach utilizes a survey to ask 50 Division III athletic directors if they engage in corporate sponsorships, who is responsible for overseeing corporate sponsorships at their school, which staff are permitted to solicit businesses and do concerns arise. Applying the results to systems theory, the implications lead to conclusions and recommendations to assist Division III athletic departments better develop this revenue stream. The research also contributes to filling a void in the existing literature within Division III corporate sponsorships.
**Key Words – NCAA, Division III, Corporate Sponsorship, Revenue, Systems Theory**

## Introduction

Sponsors are affiliated with athletic departments, athletic conferences, athletic facilities, and athletic events, including post-season competition hosted by the NCAA and other entities, as a means to generate revenue and reduce expenses (Chen & Zhang, 2011; Covell, 2001; Hobson & Rich, 2015; Jensen &Caneja, 2018; Krisel, 2005; Lee, 2000; Stotlar &Kadlecek, 1993; Tomasini et al., 2004; Weight et al., 2010). Through mutual benefits with corporate partners, athletic departments can gain financial or in-kind benefits in exchange for businesses being able to promote themselves or their products (Ko& Kim, 2014).

As of November 2020, Coca Cola had 128 deals with colleges and universities as brand sponsors while Pepsi had 110 similar deals. Nike has 120 sponsorship deals and paid 25 schools more than $1.8 million annually with Ohio State University earning $16.8 million each year and the University of Texas earning $16.7 million. Adidas has 94 similar deals with $16 million paid each year to the University of Louisville and $14 million to the University of Kansas (Staff, 2020). As athletic budgets continue to escalate (Hobson & Rich, 2015), athletic departments promote their sponsors and strive to not cross the threshold of excess commercialization (Chen & Zhang, 2011; Gray, 1996; Jensen & Butler, 2007; McAllister, 1998; Vanover&DeBowes, 2013; Yaeger &Welzel, 2000; Zhang et al., 2005; Zimbalist, 1999).

### *Division One Corporate Sponsorships*

At the Division I level, athletic departments utilize such third-party or outsourced marketing firms as JMI Sports, OUTFRONT Media, Learfield IMG College, Fox Sports, and CBS Sports to oversee their multimedia rights and secure sponsors (Maestas, 2020). Power Five affiliation, successful football and men's basketball programs, enrollment and market size are factors that can enhance the firm's ability to generate millions of dollars annually for Division I athletic departments through corporate sponsorships (Jensen et al., 2020). These findings support existing research to the importance of outsourcing as a vital revenue stream(Burden & Li, 2003; Johnson, 2005; Lee & Walsh, 2011).

Using a third-party firm does present its challenges as athletic departments lose control to the outside firm (Burden & Li, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Walker et al., 2009). In many of the contracts, Maestas (2020) notes that the firms pay a guarantee to the school then engage in revenue sharing at designated thresholds. To fulfill these financial obligations, the outsourced marketing firms focus on securing large corporate sponsorships. However, an excess of sponsors can resonate with concerns of overcommercialization at institutions of higher education (Cutler, 1999). As Covell (2001, p. 245) notes, "pursuit of athletic profits to fuel the pursuit of victories and sponsors' objectives is contrary to the operation of an athletic program within the mission of higher education." The outsourced marketing firms, athletic departments and the schools themselves must be in strategic and long-term alignment with clearly defined outcomes (Burden et al., 2006; Li & Burden, 2002; Walker et al., 2009; Zullo, 2013b). To achieve this, the school's in-house marketing director is in regular communication with the head of the outsourced marketing firm (Walker et al., 2009).


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*Division III Intercollegiate Athletics& Significance of Research*

Division III intercollegiate athletics is the largest of the three divisions under the NCAA (NCAA, 2020). With 445 total members competing in 43 conferences, the division is largely made up of smaller, private institutions (NCAA, 2020). Athletic scholarships are not offered and there is less influence by media partners as sporting events are traditionally not televised. With significantly smaller athletic budgets, Division III emphasizes three "D's" in terms of student-athletes discovering, developing and dedicating themselves to a well-rounded, holistic college experience. At the Division III level, there is less of the arms race of extravagant facilitiesand excessive salaries and buyouts for fired head coaches. There are noconference realignments in the interest of revenue-generation for member institutions as regionalized competition is prioritize with the exception of the University Athletic Association. However, Division III intercollegiate athletics still has expenses like their Division I and II counterparts and seek opportunitiesto generate revenue (Beaver, 2014; Bouchet& Hutchinson, 2011; Engbers, 2012; Fulks, 2015; Fulks, 2016; ;Luy, 2007; Sparvero& Warner, 2013; Williams et al., 2015). This can prove challenging with smaller staff sizes and administrators playing multiple roles in coaching and athletic department oversight (Barr, 2018). With minimal research on Division III sports marketing, this research will examine the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Who oversees athletic sponsorships at Division III institutions?

**RQ2:** What staff members solicit athletic sponsorships at Division III institutions?

**RQ3:** If applicable, are there concerns with multiple staff members soliciting athletic sponsorships within Division III institutions?

**RQ4:**Could systems theory apply to enhancing the operations and efficiency of corporate sponsorships within Division III intercollegiate athletics?

While additional research exists on Division I outsourcing and future trends (Zullo, 2013a) as well as the firms' perspective (Bouchet, 2010; Maestas, 2020; Zullo et al., 2014) including the challenges with escalating financial guarantees to schools, very little research exists on sports marketing, and especially corporate sponsorships, at the Division III level. These research questions and subsequent findings aim to fill the voids in the literature and offer guidance to Division III institutions and its administrators.

**Review of Related Literature**

*Previous Research in Division III Athletics*

While an abundance of research is available on Division I sport marketing and outsourcing, research on corporate sponsorships at the Division III level is non-existent. Previous literature on Division III intercollegiate athletics is concentrated in other matters. Because intercollegiate athletics can serve as an enrollment strategy at the Division III level there is ample research into enrollment (Bandre, 2011; Cooper et al., 2011; Lemoi et al., 2013; Nichols et al., 2020; Pauline, 2010; Pauline et al., 2013; Pauline et al., 2007; Schroeder, 2000; Segura &Willner, 2019; Willner, 2019) and student retention (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). Additional research examines how adding football helps this enrollment strategy (Feezell, 2009; van Holm & Zook, 2016).

Further literature on Division III focuses on student identity (Grandzol et al., 2010; Griffith & Johnson, 2002; Katz et al., 2017; Mignano et al., 2006; Sturm et al., 2011), academic support systems (Porter, 2008; Smith & Herman, 1996), academic success predictors (Emerson et al., 2009; Robst&Keil, 2000; Scott et al., 2008). and faculty attitudes towards intercollegiate athletics (Lawrence, 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009; Ott, 2011; Williams et al., 2010).

Future challenges at the Division III level are examined (Beaver, 2014; Bouchet& Hutchinson, 2011; Sparvero& Warner, 2013; Williams et al., 2015) with a theme of financial viability being prevalent. In addition, research examines Division III philosophy (Snyder & Waterstone, 2015), trends (Tobin, 2005), impact (Katz & Clopton, 2014), and factors of success (Katz et al., 2015; Schaeperkoetter, 2017). Despite the need for greater revenue streams, limited research explores athletic fundraising and sports marketing within Division III intercollegiate athletics. In the minimal cases where sports marketing is examined, the research does not explore the greater depths of corporate sponsorships.

*Research on Division III Sports Marketing*

Research on Division III sports marketing concentrates on attendance and the motivation of spectators. After studying fans from the four levels of NCAA football, Robinson et al. (2005) argue that Division III supporters have less attachment than fans at the Division I level. The authors label supporters as spectators instead of fans. Robinson (2010) noted struggles to heighten fan attendance due to the factors of a smaller fan base and reduced recognition compared to Division I intercollegiate athletics. Perrault (2016) found that students at a midsize Division III institution were more likely to attend a sporting event if they had an existing relationship with someone on the team or a coach. Katz et al. (2017) also suggest the importance of school administrators utilizing athletic events as a means of connecting incoming students early in their college careers when the new students display high levels of team identification. Additionally, Zullo (2018) examined sports marketing best practices at the Division II-level, but beyond these studies, limited research exists specific to Division III sports marketing and particularly, corporate sponsorships.

*Division III Athletic Administration: Doing More With Less*

At the Division III level of intercollegiate athletics, athletic directors and senior administrators are frequently expected to perform multiple roles. This can include coaching, teaching or oversight of an academic department (Barr, 2018; Robinson et al., 2001; Robinson et al., 2003). While athletic directors may enjoy working with and impacting student-athletes, many continue to face budget issues and would welcome more help (Robinson et al., 2003). Wearing multiple hats can prove challenging if athletic directors are expected to recruit at enrollment-driven schools, coach, retain student-athletes who are not on scholarship and also potentially teach. Athletic directors may rely upon other staff, including coaches, for such responsibilities as event management, fundraising and sponsorships.

Despite the limited research on Division III sports marketing, literature is available on Division III fundraising. In his 1999 study, Plinske prioritizes that increasing the donor base and building relationships is crucial to athletic development, particularly as it relates to helping the department's financial stability. This responsibility falls to the athletic director (Shaw, 2004) as the fundraising helps fiscal management, including increasing Title IX costs (Luy, 2007). The athletic director may also have a relationship with past student-athletes who may be more willing to contribute to athletics (Holmes et al., 2008).

Donors of athletics come from alumni and parents of student-athletes (Plinske, 2000) with loyalty and commitment being primary motivational factors for giving. Donors valued integrity, strong academics and a dedication to community. Plinske emphasizes a concept known as "friend raising" because the Division III supporters are buying into the school as a whole and not just athletics. At the same time, the athletic fundraising can raise concerns with crowding out institutional fundraising efforts (Koo &Dittmore, 2014).

Sports marketing duties can have similar tribulations as the use of multiple personnel, who have their own primary responsibilities,can prove challenging due to miscommunication, lack of prioritization, loss of control and details being overlooked. This is very similar to issues that Division I athletic departments encounter when trying to balance a relationship with an outsourced marketing firm.However, when each entity executes with the greater athletic department prioritized ahead of the individual athletic program, and when there exists continuous communication, information sharing, assessment and goal setting, then greater efficiency and more positive outcomes can be achieved. These characteristics, and others, are key components of the systems theory.

*Theoretical Framework: Systems Theory*

Johnson, Kast and Rosenzweig (1964) examined systems theory and management as it relates to business and make the analogy to that of a human body. Various parts, or subsystems, work together for the greater good of the human. The brain is top-level management or control. The nervous system is communication and the skeletal, muscle and circulatory subsystems work to form a self-maintaining structure. Businesses can operate in the same manner with six key subsystems utilized to maximize efficiency and output in a dynamic environment (Johnson et al., 1964, p. 373):

- Sensor subsystem *(measures changes within the system)*
- Information processing subsystem *(accounting or data processing)*
- Decision-making subsystem *(receives information input and communicates planning outputs)*
- Processing subsystem *(accomplishes tasks through utilization of information, energy and materials)*
- Control component *(ensures execution relative to planning and provides feedback)*
- Memory or information subsystem *(in such forms as manual or procedures)*

Management's challenge is to achieve a state of "total system for objective accomplishment" striving for all the subsystems to work as one unit and not as separate entities (Johnson et al., 1964).To accomplish this, greatattention is paid to four key concepts: planning, organization, control and communication. Planning sets goals and determines the desired outcomes looking at such factors as the environment, competitors and available resources. Organization determines the necessary tasks and how the tasks relate to the greater achievement of outcomes and efficiency for the whole versus individual subsystems. Integration and dynamic business are emphasized and resources are used more effectively. Control measures and evaluates efficiency and makes the necessary adjustments for greater productivity. It helps to pinpoint areas of importance that require greater or critical analysis, such as cost control. Communication that links the subsystems and information flow is invaluable to stronger relationships. Johnson et al. (1964) note how there is communication with the planning unit and different entities such as market research, finance and research and development. This communication permits adjustments relative to competitors and the external environment.

In a 1972 study, Kast and Rosenzweig again examined systems theory for management and organizations. The authors stressed that key components of systems theory include the following (p. 450):

| Table 1 – Key Concepts of General Systems Theory |
|---|
| *Subsystems:*interrelated, interconnected parts or elements<br>*Holism:*the system is explained in totality versus the sum of its parts<br>*Open System:* the exchange of information, energy and/or materials<br>*Input-Transformation-Output Model:* various inputs are received, transformed and exported as outputs in a dynamic, open system |

| |
|---|
| *System Boundaries:* systems have boundaries separating them from their environment<br>*Dynamic Equilibrium:* continuous inflow of materials, energy and information help with a state of balance<br>*Feedback:* positive and negative informational input from processes or output that can help to adjust, transform or maintain processes<br>*Hierarchy:* the order of subsystems (lower) and suprasystems (higher)<br>*Internal Elaboration:* systems move to greater differentiation, elaboration and higher level of organization<br>*Multiple Goal-Seeking:* multiple goals centered around different values and objectives<br>*Equifinality:*results can be achieved with different initial conditions and in different ways, diverse inputs and varying internal activities can accomplish organizational objectives |

Examining these studies on systems theory it can be argued that institutions of higher education, athletic departments and their components resemble a management system composed of smaller subsystems. The athletic department seeks to maximize communication and efficiency, striving to achieve set outcomes within the confines of such boundaries, including the institution of higher education and governing bodies.

*Systems Theory in Division I Intercollegiate Athletics*

McGuire (2006) applied systems theory to Division I intercollegiate multimedia contracts to identify each component of the partnership with an outsourced marketing firm. He then explored the interaction between each component or subsystem,pinpointing control, networking distribution, advertising and audience as key subsystems. System boundaries were featured in the form of adherence to the long history of academics and athletics at the institution of higher education.

McGuire pinpointed that the control was the athletic department having oversight into the marketing of the many sports teams. Even greater than the athletic department was the university itself and the governing bodies including the athletic conference and the NCAA, thus establishing hierarchy. The network distribution subsystem was the third-party or outsourced marketing firm that was generating revenue for the athletic department through the sale of corporate sponsorships. Advertising was the subsystem of businesses that the marketing firm approached and secured to become corporate partners of the athletic department. The audience was the athletic fan base.

Applying systems theory, structural and function interaction occurred to achieve the priority of revenue generation. The interaction was most notable between the open subsystems of control, network distribution and advertising. These three were in a greater hierarchy relative to audience and also featured a more significant level of involvement with one another. As McGuire notes (2006, p. 61), “the control-network distribution and network distribution-advertising interactions have particular importance to generating revenue, thus maintaining the system’s long-term equilibrium.”

In the case of outsourcing, negotiations occur between control systems and network distribution systems in the areas of financial guarantees, revenue sharing, available inventory, length of contractual obligations, tiering systems, exclusivity, businesses to avoid, and how many sponsorships can exist. The negotiationalso helps to address concerns of overcommercialization and to ensure the inclusion of women’s athletics and Olympic Sports in sponsorships packages. This is indicative of the holistic approach noted in systems theory. The negotiations also reflect upon the coaches’ involvement as well as the sports information director so that internal elaboration and multiple goal-seeking can be achieved.

The outsourcing truly helps to ensure that potential corporate businesses are approached by only one salesperson offering all aspects of a potential corporate sponsorship package (McGuire, 2006) thereby emphasizing system theory’s input-transformation-output model. Applying equifinality, the third-party firm is able to focus on maximizing revenue through the pursuit of potential clients and “minimizing uncertainty” for the athletic departments (p. 67).

The implications of McGuire’s research werefive-fold:

1. the system offered substantial benefits to the athletic department,
2. enhanced the flexibility of inventory options that were available to businesses due to a unilateral sales approach,
3. strengthened the relationship between control, network distribution and advertising (*school, third-party firm and businesses*),
4. enhanced long-term relationships between control and network distribution (*school and third-party firm*),
5. and featured network distribution evolving to accommodate both control (*school*) and new market environments.

In McGuire’s research, the key concepts of general systems theory were applicable in the relationship between the athletic department and the third-party marketing firm. This purpose of this research is to examine if systems theory could be applied in the same manner to enhance corporate sponsorships programs in Division III intercollegiate athletics.

**Material & methods**

There are over 400 schools competing in NCAA Division III intercollegiate athletics. A sample size of 185 was approached including the athletic directors from schools in the following 17 conferences: Allegheny Mountain Collegiate Conference (AMCC), Atlantic East Conference (AEC), Capital Athletic Conference (CAC), Centennial Conference (CC), Colonial States Athletic Conference (CSAC), Empire 8 Conference (E8), Heartland Collegiate Athletic Conference (HCAC), Landmark Conference (LAND), Liberty League Athletic Conference (Liberty), Middle Atlantic Conference (MAC), New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC), North Coast Athletic Conference, (NCAC), North Eastern Athletic Conference (NEAC), Ohio Athletic Conference (OAC), Old Dominion Athletic Conference (ODAC), Presidents' Athletic Conference (PAC), and USA South Athletic Conference (USA South).

This nonprobability sampling included schools of varying enrollment and athletic success in regional proximity to the researcher. The sample also included a mix of public and private schools. The outreach to a large sample of 185 schools, or 41.6% of all Division III schools, helps to minimize the weakness of convenience sampling not being representative of the greater target population (Andrew et al., 2011).

A database of the athletic directors' names and e-mails at these 185 schools was created after exploration of each school's athletic website. Then each director was sent an online Qualtrics survey of fifteen questions. Qualtrics was cost efficient, enabled tracking of respondents and provided updated data analytics. The tracking capability was invaluable in sending athletic directors a reminder email. Each school's identity was protected to ensure confidentiality and to enhance the response rate.

The surveys were sent in the same time frame to enhance reliability (Veal, 2006). The online survey was utilized for greater ease for the participant, personalization, higher external validity, and the ability to remind participants about the importance of their contributions to the greater findings thereby strengthening participation numbers (Dillman, 2000; Li et al., 2008; Reips, 2000). The use of a survey enhances the consolidation of mass information, improves objectivity and allows for future longitudinal studies to be conducted (Veal, 2006).

Questions were based off results from past studies (Tomasiniet al., 2004; Zullo et al., 2014)of Division I sponsorship programs that examined how to solicit sponsors, goals of sponsorship programs, sponsor objectives, problems, inventory, sponsor categories, strengths, and weaknesses. Content validity was further strengthened through shaping the survey instrument's questionsvia collaboration with Division III athletic and college administrators. Questions presented a mixture of closed-ended responses and open-ended responses to foster mixed-methods research (Andrew et al., 2011). Closed-ended questions enabled conciseness, greater ease for respondents and abridged data analysis (Ming et al., 2008). The use of open-ended responses enabled respondents to include their own responses (Veal, 2006) that can vary from the provided response list. Data was collected by Qualtrics and quantitative responses were tabulated and analyzed. Frequency distributions were utilized for ease of grouping quantitative data (Li et al., 2008). The data is grouped and included in subsequent tables (Levine et al., 1999). To further strengthen the validity, qualitative responses were also analyzed, but few common themes emerged from the limited answers to the open-ended responses (Veal, 2006).

**Results**

Fifty of the 185 invited schools fully completed the survey yielding a response rate of 27 percent. Of the 50 respondents, 48 athletic departments at the Division III level utilize corporate sponsorships.

*Oversight of Corporate Sponsorships, Solicitation and Concerns*

With respect to who is responsible for athletic sponsorships, respondents could select one response with athletic directors receiving 28 answers. The school's institutional advancement department and the sports information director were also options. The "other"response was selected by 10 respondents with open-ended responses noted in Table 2.

| Table 2: Who is responsible for athletic sponsorships? | |
|---|---|
| Athletic Director | 28 |
| School's Institutional Advancement | 6 |
| Sports Information Director | 4 |
| Other | 10 |
| Other<br>- Athletic Budget Committee (AD, Associate, Title IX Coordinator, VP Finance, VP Development)<br>- Formerly an Associate AD<br>- Assistant Baseball Coach<br>- Manager of Athletic Administration<br>- Associate AD<br>- Director of Athletic Communication<br>- AD has final say – coaches with relationships bring opportunities to the table<br>- Mix between AD and Development<br>- In collaboration with AD<br>- No response | |

As noted in the literature review, Division I intercollegiate departments outsourced their multi-media rights for sponsorship sales (Johnson, 2005; Maestas, 2020). However, at the Division III level, administrative staff is limited (Barr, 2018; Engbers, 2012) and many roles are shared, including the procurement of sponsorships.

Respondents were asked to check all that apply with respect to who could actively solicit athletic sponsorships. The athletic director was the primary staff member procuring sponsorships though the school's institutional advancement office, head coaches and the sports information director were also active in the sales process. These results and "other" responses are listed in Table 3.

| Table 3: Who solicits athletic sponsorships? | |
|---|---|
| Athletic Director | 43 |
| School's Institutional Advancement | 29 |
| Head Coaches | 25 |
| Sports Information Director | 17 |
| Assistant Coaches | 6 |
| Students in business or sports management program | 0 |
| Other | 9 |
| Other<br>- Associate Athletic Director (2)<br>- Fund Raising Coordinator<br>- Assistant Baseball Coach<br>- Manager of Athletic Administration<br>- Designated coach or athletic staff member<br>- Associate ADs<br>- No response (2) | |

Anticipating that many staff members would be active in soliciting sponsorships, a question was asked if there is a concern with multiple people approaching the same prospective sponsors. Twenty-eight respondents indicated yes as reflected in Table 4.

| Table 4: If multiple people can solicit sponsorships is there a concern with multiple people approaching the same prospective sponsor? | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 28 |
| No | 18 |
| NR | 2 |

Respondents were then asked how they rectified the concern of multiple staff members approaching the same prospective sponsor. Respondents were able to check all that apply and add in their own responses. There was a theme of communication, as noted in the "other" responses found in Table 5, in addition to the use of policy and procedures.

| Table 5: If yes, how do you rectify this concern? | |
|---|---|
| Policy in Place | 15 |
| Utilize a "Do not touch" list | 13 |
| Other | 11 |
| Other<br>- Staff Communication<br>- They must tell the AD who their market and target is of the solicitation<br>- I am new and we are rebuilding this program, so we are going to be putting a policy in place to ensure communication is air tight<br>- There is not yet a plan<br>- Communication<br>- All solicitations must be approved by the Advancement office prior to initial contact<br>- Work with Advancement and communicate with staff<br>- Once either department discovers an interested business, we call each other to decide how to best handle that business<br>- Meetings<br>- Coordinated and transparent process<br>- All sponsorship fundraising goes through the Institutional Advancement got (to get) approval | |

*Sponsor Motives*

Respondents were then asked why they believed that businesses would want to sponsor the school's Division III athletic department. Respondents could check all that apply and add in their own responses under "other" as noted in Table 6. Being a community partner, relationship with coaches/program and college alumni were the top three responses, ahead of school pride and return on marketing investment.

| Table 6: Why do you believe that businesses want to sponsor your athletic department? | |
|---|---|
| Community partner | 46 |
| Relationship with coaches or partner with programs | 33 |
| College alumni | 33 |
| School pride | 27 |
| Return on their marketing investment | 27 |
| Other | 3 |
| Other<br>- College contract - beverage<br>- Brand association<br>- Affiliation with the university and some visibility | |

**Discussion**

Of the 50 respondents from the sample size of 185 Division III athletic directors, 48 utilized corporate sponsorships. While literature exists on athletic directors' involvement in fundraising (Shaw, 2004), the findings reflect that athletic directors are typically responsible oversight of the corporate sponsorship programs within Division III intercollegiate athletics thereby addressing the first research question. Some sponsorship programs fall under the watch of a senior athletic administrator, sports information director of the school's institutional advancement department.

However, the findings indicate a shared responsibility in procuring corporate partners answering the second research question. The results note that the athletic director, institutional advancement, head coaches and the sports information director can all play a vital role in corporate sponsorships resulting in concerns surrounding shared responsibility. These concerns, especiallythe procurement of similar sponsors, relate to the third research questionin this study and are addressed by policies, a do not touch list, communication, an approval process and meetings.

However, while Division I corporate partners truly utilize sponsorships as an advertising medium (Tomasini et al., 2004; Zullo et al., 2014), Division III corporate partners are perceived to embrace sponsorships to be community partners. Being an alumnus of the school or relationships with athletic coaches and programs also play a vital role in the respondents' perception of the businesses' motives towards corporate sponsorships.

*Systems Theory and Research Implications*

Similar to McGuire's (2006) research on systems theory and Division I corporate sponsorships through outsourced marketing firms, systems theory can be observed at the Division III level (see Table 7), thereby addressing the fourth research question. Control is observed in the sense of the individual in charge of the corporate sponsorship program which the data found to be predominantly athletic directors. Just like the Division I level, these administrators must still adhere to the institution's regulations as well as those of the conference and NCAA, illustrating the presence of boundaries.

In McGuire's research, network distribution was synonymous with the third-party firm that the athletic department utilized to secure corporate sponsorships.

This research illustrates how many different staff members can be active in soliciting sponsorships at the Division III level. The depth of those soliciting, each seeking varying goals, can lead to numerous hitches in the corporate sponsorship subsystem including the disruption of the open nature of the system and the input-transformation-output model. An example of this would be multiple Division III staff members, such as coaches and administrators, approaching the same business because of a failure to communicate.

These challenges can negatively impact the greater system's outcomes of maximum revenue and positive relationships with the external environment. As the respondents indicate, theproblems can be minimized through policies, procedures and communications in a hierarchical manner between control *(athletic director)* and network distribution *(all those who can solicit sponsorships)*.

Dynamic equilibrium is achieved through internal elaboration between all subsystems including: institutional advancement, the athletic director, head coaches, the sports information director and anyone else involved in the corporate sponsorship program.

Corporate partners are present as advertising in McGuire's study and are also observed in this research as 96 percent of the respondents incorporate corporate sponsorships. But while Division I corporate partners have goals of achieving success in advertising, building awareness, increasing sales and promoting their products, the respondents' feedback, another concept in the general systems theory, reflects how Division III corporate partners were perceived to have motivations of being a community partner, enjoying relationship with coaches and/or programs and being an alumnus of the school. Audience was tantamount at both the Division I and Division III, albeit at various sizes relative to fan bases.

| Table 7: Systems Theory in Division I and Division III Corporate Sponsorships | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Division I** | **Division III** |
| **Subsystems** | *School, athletic department, outsourced marketing firm, sponsors, fans* | *School, athletic department, staff securing sponsors, sponsors, fans* |
| **Holism** | *The totality of the outsourced marketing and the athletic department relative to each sports program including women's and Olympic Sports* | *The totality of those procuring sponsors and the athletic department relative to each sports program including women's and Olympic Sports* |
| **Open System** | *Exchange of information between athletic director and outsourced marketing firm* | *Exchange of information between those procuring sponsors, including those in a school's institutional advancement* |
| **Input-Transformation-Output Model** | *Coaches and internal sports marketing staff help the outsourced marketing firm pinpoint existing relationships to further develop* | *Coaches help those procuring sponsorship to know of existing relationships to further develop* |
| **System Boundaries** | *Outsourced marketing firm must honor school and governing body boundaries* | *Those procuring sponsors must honor school and governing body boundaries* |
| **Dynamic Equilibrium** | *Balance is incurred through continuous inflow of materials, energy and information between athletics and outsourced marketing firm* | *Balance is incurred through continuous inflow of materials, energy and information between athletics staff and institutional advancement* |
| **Feedback** | *Informational input between athletics and outsourced marketing firm can help to adjust, transform or maintain processes* | *Informational input between staff procuring sponsors can help to adjust, transform or maintain processes* |
| **Hierarchy** | *Suprasystem of institution of higher education exceeds athletics and outsourced marketing firm* | *Suprasystem of institution of higher education exceeds athletics and individual sports programs* |
| **Internal Elaboration** | *Outsourced marketing firms help to procure sponsors and internal sports marketing staff help to enhance game experience and attendance at events* | *Those staff procuring sponsors work with institution of higher education for significant sponsorship opportunities (ex. facility naming rights)* |
| **Multiple Goal-Setting** | *Outsourcing marketing firms help to generate revenue and sports marketing staff help to enhance game experience and attendance* | *Staff procuring sponsors help to advance greater athletic department goals and objectives and needs of individual programs too* |
| **Equifinality** | *Results can be achieved in different initial conditions, different ways, diverse inputs and varying internal activities* | *Results can be achieved in different initial conditions, different ways, diverse inputs and varying internal activities* |

*Future Challenges and Research Implications*

Much like their Division I counterparts, Division III athletic departments strive to maximize and pinpoint new sources of revenue. Expenses continue to escalate (Fulks, 2015; Fulks, 2016; Sparvero& Warner, 2013) and fiscal management is a challenge (Engbers, 2012; Luy, 2007). Athletic directors, versed in fundraising experience (Shaw, 2004), can play an instrumental role in leading corporate sponsorship efforts. However, unlike the Division I level where sponsorships help businesses to advertise (Tomasini et al., 2004), Division III sponsors should be treated as "friends" as suggested by Plinske (2000) and supported by this research in Table 6. Analogous to fundraising, relationship building (Plinkse, 1999) with businesses should emphasize corporate partners as community partners because many businesses want to support coaches and programs, hold school pride dearly, or are alumni. With the objective of strengthening long-term business "friendships" through athletics, Division III colleges and universities can in turn strengthen "town and gown" relationships (Katz & Clopton, 2014).

*Recommendations for Practitioners*

The following are recommendations that can be embraced by Division III athletic administrators and their counterparts in institutional advancement for greater efficiency. To reiterate, management's challenge is to achieve a "total system of objective accomplishment" striving for all the subsystems to work as one unit and not separate entities (Johnson et al., 1964). Through planning, organization, control and communication additional revenue and in-kind contributions can prove invaluable in Division III fiscal management and enhancement.

1. Have consistency in oversight of the corporate sponsorship program, a system offering substantial benefits to the athletic department.
2. Incorporate shared responsibility into solicitation of businesses, which can in turn enhance the flexibility of inventory options available to potential sponsors.
3. Emphasize that communication is key between oversight of the corporate sponsorship program and various solicitation efforts to strengthen the relationship between control, network distribution and businesses.

4. Evaluate the corporate sponsorship program on a regular basis to ensure fairness, consistency, professionalism, peak performance and enhanced long-term relationships between school, athletics, businesses and fans.
5. Evaluate the corporate sponsorship program on a regular basis to ensure evolving to accommodate both control (*school*) and new market environments.

These recommendations can be observed through the lens of systems theory where subsystems are examined holistically, there exists a hierarchical organization, the subsystems interact structurally and functionally, and an open system still respects boundaries but welcomes the exchange of information and resources(Fisher, 1978). Dynamic equilibrium is a desired outcome, balanced between the coaches, staff and administrators, including those leading the institution itself. This enables greater focus on the system or athletic department's outcome of maximized revenue generation and helping all parties be successful in their multiple goal-seeking efforts.

**Conclusion**

Through inclusion of these recommendation, Division III athletic departments can begin to address many of the present challenges including fiscal concerns. The recommendations can also help address loss of control and communication issues that are ironically synonymous with outsourcing at the Division I level. Policy, procedures and regular meetings can ensure all institutional staff members are harmonious.

However, the utilization of corporate sponsorships by Division III athletic directors must continue to fit the mission of the institution and the school's core values as well as the general philosophy of Division III intercollegiate athletics that prioritizes student before athlete (Benford, 2007; Bouchet& Hutchinson, 2011; Engbers, 2012). Division III schools should not attempt to engage in the "arms race" found at the Division I level or embrace a "win at all cost" mentality (Beaver, 2014; Tobin, 2005).

While 185 schools were included in the initial study, future research presents the opportunity to examine the findings from over two hundred additional schools at the Division III level. Additionally, future research can examine whetherathletic success, athletic budget, school location (by region) or enrollment size impact responses. This is especially true as Division III enrollment sizes can vary substantially from hundreds of students on a campus to an enrollment of over 25,000 (NCAA, 2020). A 2015 NCAA study on institutional characteristics found the mean undergraduate enrollment for Division III schools to be 2,602 students. However, twenty-one percent of the schools had enrollments between 3,000 and 9,999 students, while two percent had enrollments over 10,000 students (NCAA, n.d.).

In future studies, there could also be an analysis into whether sales training is utilized for those staff members who solicit the businesses and if such concerns asinconsistent sponsorship rate, undervalued inventory, failure to understand sponsor motives, and inconsistent sponsorship follow-up are present.Exploration could determine which sports have more sponsors and if consideration is given to Olympics Sports, women's athletics and Title IX. There is also the opportunity to examine why Division III athletic departments with limited administrative staffing do not utilize business and sports management students in a greater sales capacity.Nonetheless, the study addresses the numerous research questions, begins to fill the literature gap, and helps colleges and universities to better enhance corporate sponsorship programs on their respective Division III campuses for much-needed revenue streams.

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